

An aerial, grayscale photograph of a city skyline. A tall, slender skyscraper stands out prominently in the center-right. The surrounding area is filled with a dense grid of smaller buildings and streets, with some green spaces visible at the bottom.

## **CASE STUDY: THE PORTLAND EXPERIMENT**

Portland, Oregon is often cited by anti-growth activists as an example of all the best that “smart growth” policies can accomplish. But traffic congestion and high housing prices are just two of the problems associated with the Portland’s policy of increasing housing density and limiting road expansion.

# CASE STUDY: THE PORTLAND EXPERIMENT

## Background

Portland, Oregon, is often held up by anti-growth activists as an example of all the best that high-density planning can accomplish. They claim that an urban growth boundary drawn in 1979 has controlled growth and that light rail lines have led Portlanders to be less dependent on automobiles. Public officials and reporters from all over the country are regularly taken on tours of the city to see how planning ought to be done. They are shown the rejuvenated downtown, the light rail line, and the urban growth boundary and are told by planners and anti-growth activists that Portland is “one of the nation’s most livable cities,” as cited in a Sierra Club report (1998). But is it?

## The Myth

By encouraging higher population densities, building transit instead of roads, and adopting other restrictive planning policies, Portland has improved residents’ quality of life, revitalizing the community and making residents less dependent on cars.

## The Facts

**By imposing strict zoning policies, Portland’s planners have severely limited**

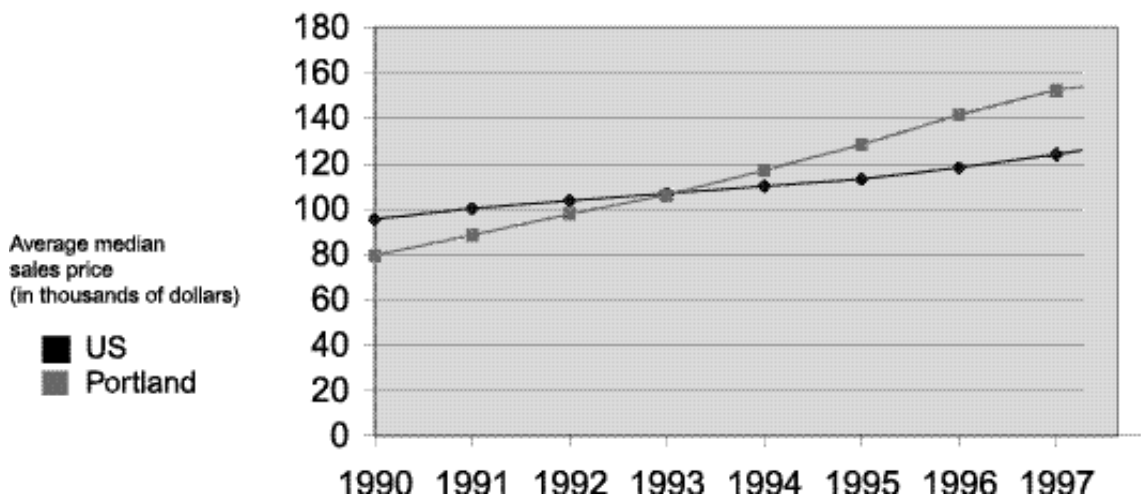
**the choices of city residents about how and where they live.**

- Limitations on development outside the city’s growth boundary have made Portland one of the least affordable cities in the country in which to buy a house. Data from the National Association of Home Builders (1999) indicate that Portland went from being one of the nation’s most affordable housing markets in the late 1980s to one of the least affordable in the late 1990s.
- Housing prices skyrocketed 99 percent in seven years during this decade (the highest rate of increase in the country), while the national average was a 35-percent increase.
- Portland created a regional authority with unprecedented power over zoning and land use issues.

**Portland’s emphasis on transit instead of highway capacity has had little impact on transit’s share of overall travel: Portlanders remain as reliant on their cars as residents of any other city.**

- Ninety-two percent of all trips in the Portland area are by automobile and fewer than 2.5 percent are by transit, according to Metro (1994), the Portland area’s regional planning authority. Even if their policies are fully implemented,

## Portland Housing Costs Now Exceed U.S. Average



Source: National Association of Home Builders

Portland planners still predict that 88 percent of travel in the area will be by car and less than 5 percent will be by transit, according to Metro.

- Although a relatively high percentage of downtown commuters use transit, only a small percentage of Portland-area jobs are downtown. The area's light rail system has not attracted even one-half the number of riders originally projected by planners, and voters have rejected expensive additional light rail plans three times in the last five years.
- Portland's policy of spending most of the region's transportation dollars on transit rather than roads has made congestion in the area worse. As a result, Portland now ranks among the top ten most congested cities in the United States, according to the Texas Transportation Institute's roadway congestion index (1999). Regional planners project that future levels of traffic congestion will get substantially worse as a result of Portland's transportation policies.

## Our Position

Growth should be recognized as a reality and planned for adequately. Rather than adopting the Portland model, localities should adopt a balanced, comprehensive approach to planning that recognizes the need for both low- and high-density development and for additional road capacity, as well as transit and other options to address congestion.

Business groups in the Portland metropolitan area and statewide have joined together to recommend urban growth and economic development policy changes that will balance Portland's decision to contain growth with the need to provide adequate land for housing and jobs. In the Portland area, groups have identified the need to expand the urban growth boundary to accommodate a 20-year supply of land for industrial and commercial development as well as housing.

### Endnotes

National Association of Home Builders. (1999). *Housing Opportunity Index, First Quarter 1999*. <[www.nahb.com](http://www.nahb.com)>.

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Sierra Club, (1998) *The Dark Side of the American Dream: The Costs and Consequences of Suburban Sprawl*, [sierraclub.org](http://sierraclub.org).